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Bruce Baillie

by Ernest Callenbach

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A Monument, An Illumination, An Attempt To Reach A Lost Friend *

Some Reflections on the Work of Bruce Baillie

The world of dew
Is the world of dew
And yet . . . and yet . . .

-Basho

It's not generally appreciated that Bruce Baillie is an artist heavily influenced by Eastern thought, and that his works are philosophical in the original sense: that is, they are about how we should live. Baillie's style is so veiled and indirect that he is often taken to be a "mere" poet, simply concerned with producing beautiful images that flow together with an unusually magical, sinuous line. It is true enough that of all our experimental filmmakers Baillie has the surest "painterly" eye. But this fails to explain a major fact about his films, namely that they have a strong emotional effect on viewers - an effect I am tempted to call "joyful melancholy." Even if we cannot put this into satisfactory words, we know the films have something to do with *us*. But what is it?

The nature of Baillie's films seems to make them unusually resistant to full critical analysis. Perhaps perversely - since I am the editor of a film journal - I consider this a mark of their artistic force. (The reader should also be aware that I am an old friend of Baillie's.) But some ingenious critical study has been done of Baillie's editing structures, marking the first time, so far as I know, that utterly lyric forms (unshaped by considerations of "plot" or argument or preconceived structural programs) have been so carefully considered. These essays remain, to my mind, a bit too formalist in emphasis, modestly refraining from speculating on the meanings of the formal strategies, the symmetries and proportions they detected in the films. But they are obligatory reading for anybody seriously interested in non-narrative film forms.

*From a subtitle in *Roslyn Romance*.

Castro Street, which is still (at least most of the time) my favorite among Baillie's films, has been given a brilliant reading by Lucy Fischer in her essay "*Castro Street*: The Sensibility of Style" (*Film Quarterly*, Spring 1976). Fischer presents forcefully the puzzle of the film (how its "plastic abstractions communicate a sense of their significance") and then analyzes what she aptly terms its "hyperbolic superimpositions."

In Baillie's films of that period, as Fischer correctly puts it, he was moving away from superimposition of the type that creates a consciousness of "opposition" between the shots that are being superimposed on each other. (And away also, I would add, from traditional "conflict"-motivated editing between shots - the sort of technique that is normally taught to film students as a way of giving "energy" to a sequence, and that television commercials rely on to keep us from going to sleep.) Baillie felt the superimpositions he had used in *Quick Billy* were "gross" — merely mechanical associations of shots, rather than the true merging (or "marriage") he had begun to seek.

For *Castro Street*, therefore, he developed those magically fluid and complex successions of matte and dissolve effects which make it literally impossible to tell, even on close and repeated inspection, what parts of the image derives from what original shot. As Fischer noted, he thus created a "seamless design," embedding one image within another to achieve a sense of "coherent union." This was achieved partly by Baillie's original hand-work technique of obscuring parts of scenes with a black-gloved hand in front of his lens, leaving a "hole" in the image which could be filled, in the printing, with parts of other images.

And partly it was achieved by Baillie's quite uncanny sense of visual tempo (altogether unmatched, I think, among other experimental filmmakers) which links his shots together to create a continuous, musical flow of related rhythms. Fischer writes that in *Castro Street* "the rhythm of a tracking shot on one image level of the frame will be synchronous with a panning action on another. The similarity of tempo works to nullify the disjunction in form and subject." But we can go much further than this observation, I think. The slow, evenly paced rhythm we sense in *Castro Street* but also in most of Baillie's other films is actually a fundamental characteristic of his films; they all have it as sort of ground-bass that persists under and through the quicker movements in individual shots, though this is most obvious in the manifestly polyphonic structure of *Castro Street*. This sinuous rhythm, I suspect, manifests Baillie's feeling of how the universe moves. To wax a little mystical, it may be the tempo of the cosmic flow. Some people experience it as "dream time," and it is also the tempo sought by practitioners of *t'ai chi*, massage, and various related spiritual or practical arts. But in the films it has manifold quite concrete manifestations, one of the most persistent being trains. As P. Adams Sitney has pointed out, trains and train tracks have figured importantly in Baillie's work since the very beginning. There is something about the heavy, rolling, measured movement of a train

that expresses the way Baillie sees the world; it is at the same time a massively concrete phenomenon and yet beautifully abstract. And if *Castro Street* is Baillie's masterpiece to date, it's perhaps because in it this principle was apotheosized. Not only do the trains glide with uncanny smoothness across the screen; the camera also glides smoothly across *them*, and across the industrial landscape in which they move, and across the people who inhabit it.

Baillie's moving camera strokes the world very much as a lover strokes the body of a beloved. There is a grave and courteous gentleness about how Baillie's camera relates to what it photographs. The railroad metaphor led Melville's Ahab to cry out that his soul was "grooved" to run on iron rails toward his dreadful "fixed purpose." Baillie's camera may sometimes move rather like a train; sometimes, as in *To Parsifal*, it may stand in for a train (or vice versa?). But it is a matter of sympathetic, instinctive parallelism, not mechanical force. It's surprising, really, that Baillie made a 3-minute film called *All My Life* which is made up entirely of one long, lingering pan shot running along a fence of rose bushes.

And even when Baillie's camera is static (which, of course, it often is — his technical repertoire being very ample) it retains something of this measured, patient gaze. And it is the quality of his seeing — the almost palpable physical grace of his camera and editing — which above all distinguishes Baillie from other avant-garde or experimental filmmakers. He is not intellectual and interested in setting us puzzles, like the structuralists. He doesn't grapple with his own soul in public like the romantics. He doesn't satirize evil like the radicals. Nor does he abstract the world totally, like his fellow Bay Area filmmaker Jordan Belson, though his films share with Belson's, it seems to me, the underlying cosmic rhythm I've been describing. In the films of both artists, we have often a feeling of a soft, even swooning through time; the camera and what it is seeing/presenting execute a stately dance together. Belson's films are totally abstract while in Baillie's one never even briefly loses consciousness that the images have sources in the ordinary visible world; nonetheless, the two seem to share the same rhythmic "wavelength" — and, of course, an interest in Eastern thought.

Alan Williams has written a highly enlightening analysis of Baillie's *To Parsifal*, bringing a kind of musical terminology to bear on its structure, complete with ABAB patterns and so on (*Film Quarterly*, Spring 1976). Considering the very free editing of this film, and of Baillie's work in general, Williams establishes an astonishing degree of structural rigor in purely formal terms, and then proceeds to use his findings in interpreting the film's mythic significance and its relation to the Wagner opera which is used on its sound track. One is always hesitant in applying verbal paraphrases to Baillie's quintessentially nonverbal films, but Williams presents a very plausible (though necessarily non-definitive) interpretation of the meaning polarities Baillie was working with. He also attacks Baillie's imagery for "adherence to cultural stereotypes of masculinity and femininity," a

charge which he would presumably also have to level against the traditions of Eastern mysticism which are central to Baillie's over-all philosophical orientation.

P. Adams Sitney has summarized Baillie's films in his *Visionary Film* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1974) and gives a good sense of the technical development of Baillie's work over the years. However, he seems to me fundamentally to misunderstand what Baillie has been up to when he writes that Baillie's films exhibit "an alternation between two irreconcilable themes: the sheer beauty of the phenomenal world . . . and the utter despair of forgotten men." That Sitney is correct about the beauty, most viewers of Baillie films would surely agree. But the second part of Sitney's formulation makes Baillie's attitude far more simple than it actually is. Sitney likes to think of Baillie as an "innocent," though a sophisticated one, perhaps because he is not in the habit of issuing lengthy programmatic rationalizations for his films. But *Quixote*, after all, would hardly have been given that title if, as Sitney thinks, it is Baillie's search for "a hero who can be his mediator without irony." Mr. Hayashi and Baillie's old Indian men fall into a category somewhat related to sainthood, and saints, we must keep in mind, customarily require martyrdom. But actually the people in Baillie's films, whether young or old or "heroic" or wasted, exist in the context of meanings that transcend "despair." What Baillie is really doing with his characters — if we may use that term for them — is to share a cosmic sadness, in which the film and filmmaker are wholly implicated. There is condescension in Baillie only toward people who are so hopelessly in the grip of American "progress" that they have no glimmer of underlying realities. It is indeed precisely the point of *Roslyn Romance*, and of much else in Baillie's work, that the beauty and the sadness coexist and intermingle and are even perhaps in some ultimate sense one and the same.

Baillie seems to have been feeling something like this when he remarked, in an interview with Richard Corliss (*Film Comment*, Spring 1971), "I want everybody really lost, and I want us all to be at home there. Something like that." Then he hesitated and said he wasn't *really* interested in that. What he *was* really interested in was "peace . . . rest . . . nothing." (Which sounds to me rather like the same thing. The interview transcript does not record whether, at that moment, Baillie gave the chuckle with which he sometimes acknowledges that he has said something outrageous.)

If *Castro Street* is the great achievement of what we might call Baillie's middle period, the last part of *Quick Billy* marked the beginning of something new: an attempt to come to terms with "drama" — acted material — which usually plays a very small part in experimental filmmaking. Baillie played Billy himself, using a rather wolfish side of himself not usually in evidence in ordinary life. And *Roslyn Romance* grew out of a further attempt to confront similar human material. It actually arose, Baillie told me, out of a video

project. He was then living in the little town of Roslyn, Washington (which is glimpsed in the film — the house was Baillie's own). He wanted to do a sort of serial or "novel" that would be broadcast week by week, rather as Jack London's stories used to be serialized in the *Oakland Tribune*. It was to be, as he puts it, reportage over a long period of time, perhaps Gorkian or Tolstoyan in spirit: a portrait of many people, with many layers of their lives coming into play. Doubtless, if the series had happened, it would have displayed Baillie's characteristic mix of deadpan humor, down-home warmth, and ravishing visual beauty, well mixed with the chill of mortality. (I forgot to ask him what that roaring wind noise is on the track of *Roslyn Romance*, probably because I'm sure it is "the breath of the night wind" that Matthew Arnold was thinking of in *Dover Beach*, the wind of death which blows over "the vast edges drear/and naked shingles of the world.")

But as it happened, only the Introduction got finished. For seven or eight years since, Baillie has been accumulating film rolls that might have been the subsequent episodes. These now amount to a whole roomful of material. But he says, at this point,that he thinks he will not do anything with this material. In fact he doesn't want to be connected with film in his old way any more: the careful refinement and integration of images and sounds. (For, though I neglected to make it clear, the sound tracks in Baillie films are also very closely worked, intricate structures.) He's turned off, as he puts it, from any form that "requires accounting." Rather than that, he'd prefer simply living by doing ordinary labor.

Art and life are connected more directly for Baillie than for most filmmakers I know, so perhaps this is a good place for a brief character sketch. When I first met him, Bruce was making a living on the banana boats — unloading the bananas that came into San Francisco harbor from Central America. It was good work because high-paid and erratic, leaving time free for filmmaking, and it also kept him in top shape physically. (Bruce is in no way a "head person," except in the sense that he pays very close attention to his dreams, and uses them a great deal in his work.) He was living at home with his parents, and devoting himself to filmmaking and to Canyon Cinema, an organization for showing experimental films which he founded a year or so before. It took its name from the rather funky little town of Canyon, a few miles outside Berkeley, an unincorporated haven for artists, anarchists, and related free souls who lived in a state of siege by the water company whose land holdings entirely surrounded the town. (The town is still there, I am happy to report, though Canyon Cinema's operations moved first to Berkeley, then to Sausalito, and now to San Francisco.)

Bruce came to see me because Canyon had been kicked out of the hall where they were showing films. Since I was the editor of a more or less respectable journal, he thought I might have useful connections; and one sunny morning he dropped by my little house next to a creek in Berkeley. We drank some tea, shared our

repugnance at the city authorities' unenlightened attitudes, and talked about how nice it would be to have a cooperative film-editing facility that independent filmmakers could use. Bruce is quietly pursuasive. In time my backyard became Canyon's exhibition hall. In the evenings people would drift in, paying their dollar at a candle-lit table, and dispose themselves in sleeping bags with jugs of cheap California wine at hand, to watch a miscellaneous collection of films put together by Bruce, Chick Strand, and a shifting assortment of helpers, often with unsung assists by Willard Morrison, then running Audio Films' local office. And a little cottage by the creek became an editing room, which went along to my basement when I had to move to another place. The atmosphere of Canyon in those days was partly an emanation of the general relaxed Berkeley tone of the early sixties, but a lot of it was surely due to Bruce's diffident yet avuncular guidance. He is a constitutional anarchist, and Canyon in those days had no officers, no by-laws, no office, and no official membership. Nonetheless, it thrived and survived, and in due course became the central focus of experimental film in the Bay Area, and then a major distribution enterprise. It even had a publication (it still does), the *Canyon Cinemanews*, which was characteristic of how things happened. *Film Quarterly* constantly received news material which, as a quarterly, we couldn't possibly print, but which might interest filmmakers. So I would type it up on mimeograph stencils as it came in, and when a couple had accumulated we would give them to Bruce's mother, who mimeographed them on the sly at her church; then we would assemble them at my house, sitting around on the floor and drinking beer. Our circulation, initially about a hundred, mounted surprisingly; we even had a subscription from the C.I.A. (yes, under their own name — and in case you're wondering, if they watch Canyon Cinema they are probably watching *you*!).

Bruce is a Midwesterner by origins, from the puritan stock that believed grace was secured by good works. Canyon Cinema, like his films, was an attempt to "do something for humankind." The other day, when were talking about *Roslyn Romance* for this article, Bruce told a story I'd not heard before, which helps to explain some things about his films, as well as his long and unpaid devotion to Canyon. In Zagreb, Yugoslavia, where he'd gone during his student days, he met an old sculptor who had done a large copper relief sculpture that encircled the well in the town square. The well, of course, had been a literal source of the town's life early in its long history, as well as its inevitable center for gossip and social interchange. And the relief encircled the well with images of the cyclic stages of human life: birth, growth, maturity, reproduction, decline, death, birth, etc. Something about the "fittingness" of this work struck Bruce so strongly that he decided, then and there, to be an artist. And so his films, gentle and unprogrammatic though they may seem, have always been attempts to help us to see better the cycles of life that lie beneath the visible surface, to understand what is real.

This is a subject matter which, of all the arts, film is perhaps the most anguishingly equipped to deal with; it is inherent, so to speak, in the very technology itself, which mummifies time (as Andre Bazin put it) and yet by doing so makes us inescapably conscious of its passing. A related tragic sense of time and loss permeates the films of Orson Welles, and of some other narrative filmmakers. It is a quality of consciousness that Baillie shares with American Indian tradition as well as with Eastern religions. It is what gives his films a curious quality he himself connects with "Celtic sadness" — sad but not morbid, and with flashes of gaiety, even hilarity.

In *Roslyn Romance* it takes on a nostalgic, elegiac tone. Yet there is never any pity in the way Baillie sees the old people who, he says, largely populate Roslyn. They are dealing with what they see as real, and always have: planting, harvesting, fixing houses, surviving. Yet the film contrives, partly by seeing them almost always through curtains of leaves, to suggest that this level of reality is a relatively transitory one. Behind it, for one thing, lies the level of seasonal change (which the changing of the omnipresent leaves duly chronicles). But behind that? The film gravely asks us to look again, as the people fade behind leaves, reappear again, bent on their inscrutably intent tasks, growing ever older, carrying out their cycle.

As Baillie explained it, the Roslyn people are attached to the "forms," their objects and houses and habits, and the mementos of the past — "the forms we use to exchange our love." But somehow we get hooked into these tools, attached to them, so that we lose the nature of the Search, forget to distinguish between "vehicle" and reality. So it is the function of the film, by abstracting us away from the supposed concreteness of ordinary film imagery, to help make us conscious that there *is* a search, and that we are implicated in it. I think it's especially nice that this is one of the functions of Baillie's leaves, since Siegfried Kracauer made so much of the fluttering of cinematic leaves as symbols of the cinema's alleged inevitable materiality and concreteness.

When you are engaged in the Search, you aren't so particular as most of us about how you live. Sometimes Bruce has lived in a Volkswagen bug (not a van, as some unbelievers have thought), indeed sharing it with a large and beloved German shepherd named Mama — Bruce had torn out the passenger seat and made a bed out of a slab of plywood. In this vehicle he lived and worked, like an unaccountably speedy turtle, covering large parts of the country while filming *Mass for the Dakota Sioux* and parts of *To Parsifal*. For a time he lived in a tiny, beautifully hand-made house in Mendocino, just back from the crash of the surf. More recently he lived in Roslyn and later in the East, near Bard College where he has been teaching. But he is now off to be artist-in-residence somewhere in the South. He lives an essentially nomadic life, for one never knows where the Search will lead. But he still comes back to see his parents, and to touch base with old friends: a poet-fisherman in Mendocino named Paul Tulley; a woman named Tung (who figures in the film Bruce made under that

title); the filmmaker Chick Strand who now lives in Los Angeles; and comrades in arms from the later years of Canyon Cinema. These friends are very different folks; as far as I can judge, what they share is that sense of Search. It is not a question of negating surface, or implying that the surfaces are not themselves real. Even in the complex, heavily superimposed, manipulated images of *Castro Street*, the surface world is not only real, it is heartstoppingly beautiful. But it is not all there is. Baillie and his friends are like Stendhal's hero — about whom Bruce was reading when he began *Roslyn Romance* — who persisted in inquiring, "Is this *all*?"

Nonetheless, neither *Roslyn Romance* nor any of Baillie's films is a demonstration of a philosophical moral, to which its form is subordinated. Zen-fashion, it approaches obliquely, trying to avoid the traps of "significant form." Its images string together gracefully, almost haphazardly, and yet . . . (and this is the real magic of Baillie's films) a mysterious melancholy arises out of them. The boy's sled in the snow (how many good films have snow scenes!) against the warp of slowed-down time, as if they have forever; only later will time speed them too into oblivion. The accordion dance-music behind the image of the old man conjures up the fairs of his youth; its gaiety is tinged with transience. The old woman prunes yet another season's growth. These are matters of fact. They are never denied or degraded by the film; yet they are somehow transformed. And this, surely, is what it means to be an artist in film: not to flail at the world, but to use the camera as an instrument of love that can transform it.

I would be the last to try and predict what Baillie will do next. But recently, perhaps partly influenced by his wife, who is an actress, he has been thinking in terms of "events" rather than film forms. It may turn out that *Roslyn Romance* was the beginning of a new period in which actions are treated very simply, as with the shots of the old woman cutting the old man's hair, or of Baillie chopping wood in the snow. Baillie talks of doing a video work, "The Dr. Bish Show." Bish is a quack healer; the work sounds like it may have links with *Quick Billy*, and would be rather funny. He likes the idea of doing it in video precisely because it would defend him against the temptations of formal perfection. Video has no depth, the color is bad, the definition is poor, the color "vibrations" have an unhealthy feel. (An idea which, by the way, is supported by some technical evidence.)

This may well be, of course, an artist's way of setting the next challenge, rather than a prediction we'll see carried out in practice. The fruitful artistic tension in Baillie's work has always been between his caring attention to the world and his sense that it conceals a "separate reality," as Castaneda terms it, which art can make evident to us. Artists are artists partly because they can't *help* making such tensions evident, no matter what they consciously think they are trying to do.

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